

(Anti-)Foundational Archives: Three Stories on Plunder, Restitution and the Commons.

- Elisa Adami

This short talk is comprised of three scenes, respectively set in London, Kinshasa and Palestine which emerge from my engagement with each place in my various roles as researcher, editor and educator. Each scene raises questions around the foundations of our knowledges as rooted within or without the archive. Taken together, they ask, from the vantage point of different geopolitical locales, what new foundations or anti-foundations we need to build as a basis for constructing alternative and emancipatory pedagogies?

Scene 1: Plunder.

I want to start this talk with a provocation connected to the title of the present conference 'foundational'. In considering the construct of the archive in London, and more broadly in the geopolitical West, I believe we cannot forget one of its foundational origins in colonial plunder. By this I mean that even if, quite obviously, not all archives in the West originated in or are connected in any way to colonial theft, the archival technologies and procedures through which materials have come to be accumulated and organised – catalogued, classified, stored and studied – bear the legacies that violent colonial conquest has imparted on our systems of knowledge.

In a 2021 essay entitled 'On Decolonisation and the University', Priyamvada Gopal reminds us how institutions of knowledge production in the West – such as the metropolitan university or the museum – 'have benefited historically not just from the flow of resources and profits from colony to metropole but also allied advantages; they have been able to accumulate archives, specimens, objects and information afforded to them, even now, by the power of colonial knowledge-gathering – ethnologising, museumising, mapping, anthropologising, narrating, cataloguing, dissecting and classifying peoples and lands outside what was deemed "Europe".'

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay defines the archive as a technology that was made possible through a 'constitutive' or founding violence exercised against other modes of engaging with and transmitting knowledge; a founding violence that separated people from their material worlds, so that they could not/and still cannot create meaning from them on their own terms. It is this founding or foundational violence that demands that we interrogate the archive, like the museum, as a repository of loot.

The institutional facts of the archive continue to reproduce this violence through policies of gatekeeping which determine who has access to them, and through economic structures that allow them to keep on profiting from looted items. The images you are seen on screen are from Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo's 1970 short film *You Hide Me*, shot in the British Museum's underground deposits. Owoo managed to outsmart the museum's directors and security system to gain access to the secret underground vaults, where he filmed the valuable African artifacts stowed away in the museum's basement, revealing the extent of colonial theft and making a powerful case for restitution.

By bringing the debates on restitution that animate museum collections to the archive, we can consider the latter's material conditions – such as for instance, the control over what and who is admissible in the archive, or the legal infrastructure that turns stolen objects into institutional or individual property – as an epistemic and political question. Haitian historian

Michel Rolph Truillot has termed these conditions as the ‘unequal distribution of archival power’. It is this unequal distribution that continues to dictate the ways in which history is told, producing silences, omissions and distortions in its long wake.

If we are to confront these often uninterrogated or unacknowledged imperial foundations of the archive, our approach will need to become anti-foundational. We will need to **‘decolonise’** or, as Azoulay puts it, **‘unlearn’** the archive so that other suppressed stories and modes of knowledge might (re-)emerge in its place.

Scene 2: Restitution.

In March 2023, with colleagues from Afterall, the research centre at Central Saint Martins where I currently work, I visited the Académie des Beaux Arts de Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the largest fine art academies in sub-Saharan Africa. The research trip followed one year of remote collaborations with colleagues at the Académie, which led us to organise online talks and conferences hosted by CSM and SOAS. Stemming from Afterall’s commitment to think of art in a global and decolonial perspective, this initial collaboration was conceived as part of a broader, still ongoing effort to set up a more long-term partnership with the Académie. From the start, we were confronted with innumerable difficulties that can be ascribed to the (neo)colonial structures and mentalities that endure administratively in institutional contexts, spanning from structures of funding and economic asymmetries to bureaucratic hurdles.

Like most modern universities around the world, the origins of the Académie des Beaux Arts de Kinshasa lie in colonial Europe. Founded in 1943 by the Belgian brother Marc Stanislas (born Victor Wallenda), the École Saint-Luc à Gombe-Matadi moved to Kinshasa (then Leopoldville) in 1949 and became the Académie des Beaux Arts in 1957. A strong believer in the theory of a ‘innate African aesthetic imagination’, Wallenda, during his long tenure as director of the institution, obliged his students to inspire themselves only from ‘traditional oeuvres’, ensuring they would not be exposed to European art and even less to books on the history of art. Yet, this construction of ‘African authenticity’ as an innate and unchangeable quality, was itself a colonial invention. Further, the structure of the academy followed nonetheless a European model and conception of art, with its division in discipline-based sections: painting, sculpture, pottery and architecture. These origins, as Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe puts it, illustrate the ‘colonial acculturation of African societies.’ In its later evolution, the Académie adopted a more explicitly Eurocentric approach, based on the interpretation of Western academic canons and African statuary.

Yet, these historical foundations are far from fixed and deterministic. Each new generation of students – from the Librist Group in the late 1990s to today’s students and young staff members – have pushed against the traditional aesthetic standards imposed by the institution, challenging its colonial origins.

During our week in Kinshasa, in between visits to informal and formal exhibition spaces, galleries and museums, we had a full day of dialogues and conversations with students and recent graduates. One of the most heated topics of discussion revolved around the question of restitution. In 2022, the Belgian Prime Minister handed over to the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo an inventory of 84,000 Congolese artifacts appropriated during the colonial period, as a first, mostly symbolic step towards restitution. The majority of these objects, and many more, come from Belgium’s AfricaMuseum. Established in 1898 in Tervuren on the outskirts of Brussels, the museum houses around 129,000 African cultural

artifacts (including masks, animal hides, necklaces, statues, knives, gems, spears, drums) as well as, more disturbingly, human remains. Seen from the perspective of the Global South, the periodic attempts to engage with, debate, reform and decolonise archives and museum collections in the Global North appear as tepid acts of salvage, insufficiently radical and often complicit with neo-colonial policies that continue to stall or delay restitutions. They certainly do not measure up to the scale of demands for a new social and economic settlement.

Yet the dilemmas of restitution do not stop in the Global North but follow the objects back home. Serge Matuta, a young student at the Académie, spoke with passion about the dilemmas surrounding a project of restitution of seven Mbuti skeletons exhumed by a Swiss doctor in the 1950s from the northern Congolese province of Haut-Uele, and since held in the University of Geneva. This project has been pursued by the Lubumbashi-based collective Centre d'Art Waza and the Group 50:50, as part of their discursive programme *The Time for Denial Is Over* – a programme that intends to lay the foundations for a transnational restitution movement. While an agreement was reached between the University of Geneva and the University of Lubumbashi, Serge pointed out that the restitution will be of no use if the skeletons are to be put again in archival boxes, this time in the DRC, rather than Switzerland. He argued that the Mbuti community needs to be centrally involved in the process of restitution and that the final decision on what to do with the seven skeletons should ultimately rest with them. He highlighted the contradictions existing within the community, with part of its members showing a reluctance to receive back the seven exhumed skeletons, because their second burial would constitute a breach of their customary laws.

As Serge's intervention points out, the removal of objects and ancestral remains from the polysemous material and spiritual practices endemic of diverse communities and their reduction to interchangeable and standardised archival items, has produced a lasting rupture in these communities' material and spiritual worlds. Violently introduced in the imperial archive after been detached from the environments, communities and modes of activity they had belonged to – in this case, the burial grounds visited and attended to by loved ones – the return of the Mbuti skeletons will require an effort of reparation and re-foundation of the political and cosmological formations they were once part of. While, as the contradictions that Serge raised demonstrate, a simple return to the precolonial past is not possible, their repatriation offers nonetheless an opportunity for laying new foundations for the future. The emancipatory nature of these foundations will perhaps depend on, as Serge observes, the degree to which they will be able to involve and respect the decisions of the community the exhumed bodies or stolen objects once belonged to. It will depend, perhaps, on the creation of new rituals to accompany their return.

Scene 3: Commons.

If restitution has the potential to bring about the reparation of material worlds, how do we repair the damage done to the cultural, epistemic and spiritual resources of colonised regions? And how do we recover the stories and practices that have been banished from, denied or rendered unthinkable by the archive?

For the past few years, I have been working with Palestinian-American artist Nida Sinnokrot as managing editor of a monographic book about his project Sakiya. // Founded in 2016 with architect Sahar Qawasmi, Sakiya – Art | Science | Agriculture is a research platform, progressive academy, interdisciplinary residency programme and farm located on a rewilded hillside in Ein Qiniya, a small village 70 km west of Ramallah. Once fully cultivated, the area has been mostly abandoned since the 1967 occupation, strangely rewilded by its political

circumstances. Following the parcellation of the West Bank laid down in the Oslo Accords of 1993, the site fell under the classification of Area C, meaning under full Israeli security and civil control. Since 2018, Nida and Sahar, with the help of locals, have renovated the site and have started using it as headquarters for Sakiya.

One of the foundations of Sakiya's mission is to recover abandoned or forgotten indigenous agrarian practices and their associated rural knowledges, passed-down wisdom and mythologies rooted in a balanced and embodied stewardship of nature. Its aim is to resurface these pre-colonial practices and mythologies through artistic methodologies that embrace past agricultural traditions of subsistence cultivation and combine them with contemporary ecological thinking. Central to this vision is the notion of *mashaa*, an Arabic term which loosely translates to commons and points to a system of communal land tenure and resource management prevalent across the Levant up to the early twentieth century.

The idea and practice of *mashaa* is mobilised by Sakiya both literally to mean the present recuperation of communal agrarian arrangements as an environmentally sustainable practice, and metaphorically to promote the commoning of knowledge through resource sharing and open access. Similarly, the capacious concept of 'rewilding pedagogy' – the guiding frame of a symposium organised by Sakiya in 2019 – brings together the ecological reparation of soils from the ravages of industrial agriculture and monocropping with a reclamation of indigenous knowledge from colonial epistemicide, corporate theft and the imposition of a 'monoculture of knowledge.'

Sakiya's bridging of demographic divides (bringing together farmers, artisans and local elders with artists, architects, writers and students), its re-evaluation of rural knowledges (like the dwindling art of building dry-stack stone walls) and initiatives like 'Garden as classroom' (where learning is rooted in the land and surrounding environment) point to a conception of knowledge that is horizontal and far more expansive than that warranted by the archive in its imperial configuration. Sakiya draws from and endeavours to retrieve and preserve alternative cultural archives, whose endangered endurance depends on oral histories, embodied practices, ritual traditions and the use of vernacular expressions. The continued existence of these alternative or subaltern archives does not depend, like that of imperial archives on upholding the exclusionary infrastructures of private property. Quite the contrary, it requires constant sharing and commoning to ensure the survival of what is threatened by ongoing cultural erasure and genocide.

To conclude.

Azoulay exhorts us to '**unlearn the archive**' in its current configuration, so that we might replace the imperial impulse to possess with '**a shared right to participate in the commons.**' This task of undoing is for Azoulay common to both the victims and perpetrators of colonisation – or their descendants. It is what unites the different geographical places I have travelled to in this talk, and no doubt many more. As we rethink the foundations or anti-foundations of the archive for a truly post-imperial world, we will need to refuse the foundational acts of looting, seizure and imposition of private property, so as to make space for the commons of knowledge.